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**THE INFLUENCE OF GUILD TOWARDS  
THE DUTCH ECONOMY AND COMMUNITY**

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**Abstract**

The history of the growth of a city in Western Europe, particularly the cities in the Benelux region in the Middle Ages cannot be separated from the presence of Guilds, which is a group of craftsman for tools in need by society to lead their everyday life. With a simple and compact historical approach, this paper reveals the legacies left by Guilds in medieval times. These legacies have physical and non-physical (social systems) form in the social life of today's modern European society, especially the Dutch community who are in the Benelux region. However there are several loopholes that could bring negative impact in today's modern social life.

**Keywords:** guild, Benelux, city development, city growth, medieval

**Introduction**

Guild is an organization of craftsmen of homogeneous products gathering as a union, which was formed in the 11th century in Western Europe. The emergence of modern towns in Western Europe and in the Netherlands in particular, encouraged the formation of various guilds which were at the time, a crucial aspect in the fulfillment of society's needs, especially those of the middle class. Soon after, the emergence of these guilds had noticeably made an impact on the development of the town and the social life of the communities in which they existed.

Along with the rapid growth of towns and the social life of the communities in Western Europe and in the Netherlands in particular, the role of guilds became increasingly important as it grew equally important for the supply of goods to meet the needs of the upper middle class community and the infrastructure's development of the growing town itself. Therefore, the guild can be included in the group of society that held a key role in the development of towns in the second half of the Middle Ages.

In the beginning, a guild would produce a particular product of item or food that would later be directly marketed by the trade union associations that were also growing rapidly in the Netherlands at the time. However, the continuing growth of the city and its developing society demanded an increase in production without losing the quality of the goods and the food they were able to produce. This became the key factor that caused change in the guild, because at this time there were guilds that started to appear producing one specific raw or base products of an item. For example, in the beginning, one guild would produce a shoe as their product, but at the end of the 12th century various guilds appeared with more specific products in shoe parts, for example, there would be a guild that just manufactured soles, processed leather for the shoe, or produce just shoelaces, and later these parts would continue into a special guild that assembled the parts into a pair of shoes that is ready to use with guaranteed quality.

### **Guild, the Community, and Urban Development in the Netherlands**

The Netherlands was once a part of the Benelux region (Belgium, Netherlands, and Luxembourg), so that there is a strong connectivity existing in the Netherlands's present society with those that belong to cities currently a part of the Belgian state. Therefore, the growth of cities in the Netherlands today had started from the southern part because it was associated with the distribution of goods produced by guilds that were marketed by the trade unions existing at the time.

The distribution of areas for cities in the Netherlands that we find today is a result of the growth of towns in the medieval period. The guilds, that were present as a result of the formation of the trade unions, occupied areas away from the urban community, but within territories that contained these specific requirements:

1. Occupy land within the vicinity of the fortress as a form of defense against invasion from the surrounding areas.
2. Be strategically placed alongside trade routes. For example, at the intersection of two trade routes or in areas alongside rivers which served as trade routes.

Division of class society during the period became a positive factor for the growth and development of the guilds in the Netherlands, because those taking part in a guild would occupy a more distinguished position in the class of society. They (members of the guild) were considered to be important people because they had power over the production of the goods that were mostly dominated by items in demand by the higher social class. So during that period, guilds had a good relationship with the nobles, the knights, and the scholars who at the time had belonged to the upper class of society and were entitled with many privileges in the social community life.

Guilds in the Dutch society that existed during this time had a great influence within the government system. While members of the government were busy with city growth through the economy and trade, the guilds that were present had the power to “determine” the pattern of development in the growth of the city and society at that time.

Based on those grounds, many from the Dutch society at the time struggled to seek entry and be admitted in schools established by the guild. In as much that these schools later became the pioneer to vocational schools in the Netherlands before the emergence and popularity of Universities that grew at the time where thoughts developed and propagated by western philosophers during the period of aufklärung onwards.

### **The Social Function of Guild in the Netherlands**

As I have explained in the previous section, the guild holds a very strong social function in the Dutch society, especially for those who are members of particular guilds. Guilds at the time can become a social security system for its members, and sometimes for the general public. Actions undertaken by guilds that were beneficial for the community's social life in the Netherlands

1. Celebrating the coronation ceremony of a new meester (the highest level of authority in the guild's structure). Even though it was the guild's internal event, it had an outward effect, putting social function to the surrounding community because of the free drinks and food that were distributed among them.
2. Donate money to the local churches of their area.
3. Settling payment for the funeral costs of guild members and undertaking financial responsibilities towards the widows and orphans of the deceased.

Meanwhile, special benefits that could be obtained as guild members are as follows:

1. Free education for children of meesters that were financially declining.
2. Health insurance were provided for guild members who were ill or had accidents during their work.
3. Any guild member who were suddenly decapitated of their financial resource, for example after being robbed, would be provided by the guilds, in this case capital to rebuild their business.
4. In the case of any refutes in payment by a foreigner to an agreed price, then the guild will take the stance as debt collector on behalf of its member, and would face the community leader of the foreigner's origin.

### Guild's Influence towards the Educational System in the Netherlands



Figure 1.

Source: [http://beroepskeuzeonline.nl/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=26&Itemid=59](http://beroepskeuzeonline.nl/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=26&Itemid=59)

Description:

1. Purple: basic education
2. Green: junior secondary education
3. Blue: upper secondary education
4. Yellow: educational skills/vocational higher education
5. Red: higher education/university

Figure 1 above shows how highly organised the educational system is in the Netherlands. After graduating from the basic level, students are already provided with the acknowledgment/choice of which competence they want to gain

once they finish their school. This will help determine whether the student will continue their studies to the university or to a vocational higher education.

In my opinion, the educational system for skills/vocational system are a legacy of the school system established by the guilds in the Middle Ages. Therefore, young people in the Netherlands do not all have the orientation to continue their education to university, but from junior high school students have been given the freedom to choose which field they would want to master by the time they manage to successfully complete their education at the highest level. Thus, the Dutch people have a clear function in society and in their working environment after the completion of their education.

For this reason, it is not surprising that in the Netherlands we find a barber who has a certificate of completion in education as a barber and hair stylist, a baker at the bakery shop with a certificate from the culinary school specialising in bread and pastry, a realtor who possesses a special license and certificate in the expertise of realtors, gardeners who obtain their certificate in the field of gardening management, a restaurant entrepreneur who holds a certificate of expertise in the restaurant management, and other professions.

## **Conclusion**

Guilds in Western Europe and particularly in the Netherlands, which began to flourish and develop in the Middle Ages, had an enormous role in the formation and growth of cities and the social life of the community in the Netherlands. The existence of the cities in the Netherlands today cannot be separated from the emergence and development of the guilds in the Middle Ages. Fortress and streams remain an important characteristic in the existence of a town in Europe, and with the presence of the guilds, the function of a castle became increasingly important, whereas the topography and the demographics of areas alongside rivers developed in rapidity. This is because the guild had a major function in meeting the needs of society at that time, especially the needs of the upper class society who were always in high demands in all aspects.

Not only did the guilds bring physical influence in development of towns, but the social security system that they created for their members also brought influence to the present day policy models within the social structure of the Dutch community, for example in their insurance system, safety assurance, and retirement. Furthermore, the educational system applied to this day in the Netherlands is also a legacy of the educational system (schools) that were created by the guilds at that time to prepare successors who mastered the skills of their respective guilds. Despite of the many positive effects that were brought forward by the guilds in the Netherlands during the Middle Ages, there were also negative impacts. One of which would be the creation of the monopoly system in the field of trade and economy. This can occur for the main reason that each guild was a master in the products that they were able to produce and in the fields that they practiced. So, there had been no reason to negotiate the prices of the goods that were produced or items that were taken care of by the respective guilds, hence situations like these can become very dangerous if political interests chooses to seep into the guild system.

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